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On March 15, 1955, the I.F.A.N. /Institut Français d'Afrique Noire/ was informed by the administration of the Collège Technique d'Industrie at Fann of the discovery, by students of this establishment, of human skeletons inside a baobab located between this school and the Mandel rest home, at the edge of the Médina of Dakar (1). The next day we went

1. Discovery announced in the Paris-Dakar of March 22, 1955. February 19 was given erroneously.

to the spot and returned from there on March 19.

This baobab, called "Bok," rises in the middle of a former garden. It is of fine size: 15 meters high, 18.50 meters in circumference, or nearly six meters in diameter (Fig. 1). The trunk is hollow and forms a nearly circular chamber, 3.50 meters in diameter by six meters high, connected to the outside by three orifices: one on the east at ground level, 60 centimeters high by 45 wide, through which there is access to the interior; a sort of dormer window, 0.35 by 0.25 of a meter, on the north face, /73/ 75 centimeters above the ground; and, in the ceiling of the interior cavity, a slit one meter long by about 0.30 of a meter wide (Fig. 2).

Inside, the ground is composed of brownish earth mixed with sand and many human bones. The upper layer had already been excavated by students desirous of procuring skulls for themselves. The first time, we took away the bones found on the surface, not having the means to make excavations. When we came back two days later with the necessary equipment, we noticed that meanwhile new borings and samplings had been made by the students; thus this time it was wise to remove /Fig. 1 appears here/ all the osteological material possible, without being able to proceed with methodical excavations.

We therefore rescued all that we could; the skeletons were tangled up in the most extraordinary fashion without any attempt at orientation. The bodies had, obviously been thrown down

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pell-mell. The skulls appeared with the face turned up, down, or to one side. The piling at certain points was hard to believe: in a single space of 80 by 60 centimeters and a depth of 40 centimeters, nearly 20 skulls, without counting other bones, were found!

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No implements accompanied the skeletons, neither iron bracelets, shell necklaces, nor pottery, as in the burials of the

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Fig. 1. The baobab Bok (north side). The persons are standing in front of the entrance hole. In the center, the "dormer window."

beach of Ouakam, for example (2). Only a few basalt pebbles

2. /Monod, Th./ "En attendant l'homme fossile /While awaiting fossil man/," Dakar, Notes Afr., No. 2, April 1939, pp. 8-9; Corbeil, R., Mauny, R., Charbonnier, J., "Préhistoire et Protohistoire de la presqu'île du Cap-Vert et de l'extrême

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Ouest sénégalais /Prehistory and Protohistory of the Peninsula of Cape Verde and the Extreme West of Senegal/," Bull. de l'I.F.A.N., /1948/, p. 450.

were mixed with the skeletons, which were found to a depth of 60 centimeters, the soil below, consisting solely of sand, being intact.

In all, about 20 skulls practically in good condition and about ten in bad condition, including one of a child, and hundreds of bones were brought back for study by the Section d'Anthropologie of the I.F.A.N. /Fig. 2 appears here./ [128]

There is no doubt about the meaning of this discovery. We are dealing with a baobab that served as a burial place for griots /musicians, storytellers/ in a recent past (3); the Baobab [565]

3. Probably until the effective Islamization of the peninsula due to the establishment of the theocratic Lébou community about 1795, although isolated cases could have occurred up to a about the founding of Dakar (1857). [175]

of Bok, moreover, is also known in the neighborhood by the name of "goui guevel" (Baobab for Griots).

It is likewise the name of goui guevel (shown, moreover, on the Yof sheet at 1/20,000, 1954) that designates another baobab (24.50 meters in circumference) located west of the village of Ouakam, which I visited April 6, 1955, without being able to get into it, the opening being too small (0.60 x 0.15 of a meter).

A small village bears the same name northeast of Ouayembam (Sangalkam sheet at 1/20,000, 1941). /74/ /Fig. 3 appears here./

The interment of griots in hollow trees has, moreover, 000

15: Mauny--4 E-5 (1955) 1955 MS37 Senegal MS37

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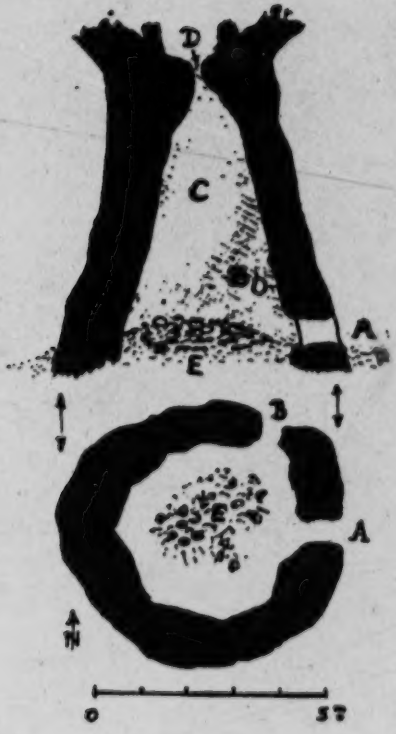

Fig. 2. Cross-section and ground plan of Bok: A. Entrance orifice; B. Window; C. Interior chamber; D. Ceiling orifice; E. Layer of bones.

15: Mauny--5 E-5 (1955) 1955 MS37 Senegal MS37
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Fig. 3. Burials in the country of the Jalophes (Wolofs) according to Dapper (1668). In the background one sees a griot who is being interred in a hollow tree.

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The interment of griots in hollow trees has, moreover, been reported in Senegal for a long time. It is always practiced in Sérère /Serer/ country; this custom does not seem to have been known outside the territory and seems to have been completely abandoned, for example, in Wolof country where it must have been practiced in former times (4). The case of the peninsula of

4. Dapper (1668) mentions it in the "pais des Jalofes /country of the Wolof/," but includes in this latter Sine, Baol, and Joal, Sérère countries (1686, p. 228).

Cape Verde is somewhat special, its populations having been in close contact with the Sérère, whose habitat begins just east of Bargny and even includes a good part of the region (Sébikotane, Pout, Thiès, etc. are in Sérère country).

To my knowledge the first to mention this funeral custom was Alvarez d'Almada (1594) who reports it in Saloum (5). The

5. Silveira, L., 1946, p. 25.

15: Mauny--6 E-5 (1955) 1955 MS37 Senegal MS37
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explanation given was already the one that is advanced today: if the griots (Judeus) were buried in the depths of the earth, the fields would no longer produce.

Following the R. P. Alexis de Sainct Lô (1637, p. 88), Dapper (1668) relates the same belief and reports that the ostracism cast on the griots is applied even to their wives and their children and that they can neither be put in the earth nor thrown into the sea or a river (6). His account of the interment

6. Dapper, O., French translation 1686, p. 235.

of tambours in baobabs is illustrated by a drawing (Fig. 3). His account is taken up again by Barbot (1732) (7). The Chevalier

7. Barbot, J., 1732, p. 55.

de Fréminville relates to us the discovery of a baobab cemetery for griots near Hann in 1822 (8). Abbé Boilat (1853) and

8. Herpin, E., 1913, pp. 120-121, and 1955, p. 45; for a case noted at Dakar in 1873, see Th. Monod, 1949, p. 311, and J. Hachet, 1892, p. 38.

Carrère and Holle (1855) (9) recall briefly the same custom.

9. Boilat, Abbé P. D., 1853, p. 315; Carrère, F., and Holle, P., p. 68.

Nearer to us, Diguy Kanté, Valtaud, and Aujas report it in Sérère country (10).

10. Kanté, Diguy, 1917, p. 156; Valtaud, 1922, p. 251; Aujas, L., p. 321.

15: Mauny--7 E-5 (1955) 1955 MS37 Senegal MS37
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An unpublished source of information is furnished us by the notebooks of vacation homework of pupils of the William-Ponty School, written in 1945, which had as subject "the funeral rites" (11).

11. Let us cite, among others, the studies of MM. Diouf Khar N'Dofène, NDao Ibrahima, Diop Boubacar, N'Diaye N'Diaga, Diop Biram. These notebooks are kept in the Section de Documentation of the I.F.A.N. at Dakar.

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From these studies several facts stand out from the others:

a) This custom is practiced today only in animist Sérère country.

b) It is tending to disappear because of new ideas (flight of the griots to the cities, where they melt into the masses; hygiene; equalitarianism /75/ preached by Islam, Christianity, schools, etc.

c) The griots of our day are buried with the other "people of caste" (blacksmiths, shoemakers, weavers) in a cemetery near, but different from the one for the noble classes of the society.

This is how, according to these notebooks, a griot interment takes place in animist Sérère country.

The griot in Sérère country, as in a large part of Black Africa, occupies the bottom of the social ladder. An inferior, scorned, and feared being, it is not appropriate for him to be buried; the soil of the land where he would rest "would be rendered sterile forever or at least its yield would diminish from year to year."

After his death one proceeds with his funeral toilet, which is the same as for the other castes: the dead man is clothed in his finest garments, then wrapped in a pagne /Fr., a long strip of cloth/, and then "fastened with palmyra leaves in such a way as to form a solid package."

He is then laid out on a litter and carried to the baobab-cemetery by two strong young men, accompanied by the crowd of griots of the village, men and women.

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The hollow baobab chosen has an opening obstructed by brambles to keep out hyenas and jackals.

When the procession arrives in front of the baobab, the young men rush and jostle one another to be the first to enter the tree. They are armed and engage in a savage struggle with this aim, spurred on by the cries of the women, who appeal to their bravery and sing their praises.

Finally, one of them succeeds; henceforth he will do his utmost, with the help of his weapons, to prevent the others from entering in their turn. The candidates fight from the outside with the winner on the inside. The combat stops only when a second fighter has conquered the winner; then both bring the corpse into the tree amidst the applause and songs of those present. They lay the dead man on the pile of previous corpses without other ceremony. The two winners are regarded as heroes by the girls, while the other young men beaten in the course of this struggle "have lost their honor and degraded their families," cruel shame in Senegal; they will find it difficult to marry...

This custom from other ages is obviously destined to disappear rapidly in the face of the evolution of customs; the land already lost (Lébou country, part of the Wolof and even Sérère country) allows it to be clearly foreseen, although the interested persons themselves, the Sérère griots, continue to practice it in many places in Sine-Saloum and Baol.

Therefore it was necessary to describe it in a little more detail than the previous authors have done, before it is no more than a memory.

By a fair reversal of things, it is provocative to note concerning the Bok discovery that the skeletons of the most despised caste have been almost perfectly preserved in these very special conditions of inhumation in a baobab, while absolutely nothing of the bones of the great of the country, the guers, remains after perhaps less than a century; the Senegalese sand, moistened by the winter rains, reduces them to impalpable dust or bony splinters which do not withstand being touched (12).

12. Corbeil, R., Mauny, R., and Charbonnier, J., op. cit., 1948, p. 442.